

# Cicero and the young Octavian

Kathryn Tempest

Cicero came to think that Octavian was a teenage butcher. Octavian in turn was party to having Cicero put to death. But Cicero had been happy to have the future emperor Augustus as his guest. What went wrong? Kathryn Tempest investigates.

History remembers Augustus as the first emperor of Rome, the man who imposed order and established peace after decades of civil war and strife. But he was just eighteen years old when he made his first appearance on the political scene in 44 B.C. His moment arrived when he was posthumously adopted by his great-uncle, the famous Julius Caesar. Thereafter, he became Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus ('Octavian'), although he preferred to call himself 'Caesar'. This new name – together with the wealth and popularity he inherited – quickly enabled Octavian to strengthen and secure his position in the state.

One of the men who met Octavian at this time was Cicero – the Roman orator, politician, and statesman. In his personal letters, which were edited and published after his death, Cicero provides fascinating glimpses into the character of Octavian, as well as his phenomenal rise to power. At the same time, Cicero adopted a controversial policy towards Octavian which helped pave the way for the latter's success. Cicero's speeches and letters thus provide valuable evidence for the early years of Octavian's career, as well as the relationship that formed between the two men.

## First impressions

The basic background story to Octavian's rise to power is well known: on 15 March 44 B.C., the so-called Ides of March, Julius Caesar, who held the position of dictator, was assassinated in a meeting of the senate. When his will was later opened, it revealed that he had adopted his great nephew and left him the greater part of his estates and possessions. On hearing this news, that nephew, Octavian, who had been waiting to join the late Julius Caesar on an expedition to Parthia, hastened to Italy, where he arrived on 18 April 44 B.C. The very next day, he joined Cicero at his villa in Cumae and the pair then moved to

Cicero's villa in Puteoli (seen below): 'Octavian is here with me – most respectful and friendly', Cicero wrote to his friend Atticus:

*Some men are calling him Caesar, but Philippus does not, nor indeed do I. In my view, he cannot possibly be a good citizen.*

(To Atticus 14.12.2)

To put this letter into context, it is important to understand what Cicero meant by a 'good citizen' and why he didn't believe that Octavian measured up to that ideal. For the term 'good' (*bonus* in Latin) has a political connotation: the good men (the *boni*), in Cicero's terminology, were all those who championed the collective authority of the senate and the Republic. But this was precisely the form of government which Caesar had been accused of demolishing in his lifetime. By taking Caesar's name – a name which both Cicero and Philippus (Octavian's step-father) refused to use in addressing the young man – Octavian was already giving Cicero reasonable grounds for suspicion. Despite the fact that Octavian appeared respectful and friendly, Cicero was not convinced of his intentions.

## There may be trouble ahead

Cicero's doubts about Octavian are further revealed in later letters of the same year. When Octavian arrived in the April of 44 B.C. Cicero could only speculate on the trouble brewing in the distance: Octavian was going to seek his inheritance, but he feared a huge tussle with Marcus Antonius (better known as 'Antony') – a man who was not only twice his age, but who was also one of the two annual consuls of Rome that year. For his part, Antony under-estimated the youth; nor did he wish to hand over Octavian's inheritance to him – a part of which he had already spent. Tensions between the two men

therefore escalated over the next six months, and, by October, there was even a rumour in the air that Octavian was plotting to have Antony killed. Cicero was back in Rome by this time, and his letters shed an interesting light on these events:

*Many think that Antony has made up this charge of a conspiracy, in order to lay siege to the young man's money; but intelligent and likewise good men believe in the deed and even approve it.*

(To his friends 12.23.2)

In short, it was just a rumour. But the fact that Cicero couldn't dispute it tells us a lot about how he perceived Octavian's character and ambitions.

Indeed, less than a month later, Octavian's plans had become all too clear. Cicero told Atticus:

*He intends to wage war against Antony, with himself as commander.*

(To Atticus 16.8.1)

As he made his preparations, Octavian needed Cicero's help more than ever:

*Two letters have reached me from Octavian in one day, asking that I come to Rome at once; he says he wants to work through the senate.*

Octavian was after Cicero's advice and he needed him to act as his spokesman (as he was still far too young to be a senator):

*He is insistent but I am being cautious...I don't trust his age and I don't know what he is after.*

(To Atticus 16.9)

But the truth was that Cicero needed Octavian's help, too: his personal campaign against Antony had already started, and Cicero was aware that he couldn't fight Antony with words alone. Octavian's political popularity, on the other hand, together with the army he had managed to gather, would be useful weapons in that battle.

## A risky strategy

In the months that followed, a tireless and vicious campaign was conducted on all sides of the political divide. By this time,

Antony had left Rome to take over his post as the governor of Cisalpine Gaul. However, the current governor of Gaul, Decimus Brutus, refused to give up his command. Antony and his forces therefore besieged Brutus' troops at a town called Mutina. This charade went on until open battle finally broke out in April 43 B.C.

Back at Rome, meanwhile, Cicero delivered a series of speeches called the *Philippics*, in which he urged the senate and people

- to send an army to help relieve Brutus and his troops;
- to take aggressive action against Antony and declare him a national enemy;
- to bestow extraordinary powers and honours upon the young Octavian.

Cicero even argued that Octavian should be made a senator and given powers equal to those of an ex-praetor (the second highest position in Rome after the consulship).

It was a risky strategy to place so much power in Octavian's hands, and not everyone approved. In particular, Marcus Brutus – one of Caesar's assassins and Decimus Brutus' relative – wrote to Cicero warning him of his concerns:

*I wish you could see how deeply I fear that young man.*

(To Brutus 1.4a.3)

As events turned out, Brutus was right to be afraid.

### The death of Cicero

Although the forces of Decimus Brutus and Octavian won some initial successes against Antony, the fighting at Mutina came at a high price: whereas Antony escaped alive, both the consuls for 43 B.C. were killed in battle. This meant that the top jobs were up for grabs at Rome, and Octavian now set his heart on the vacant consulship. Cicero initially did his best to dissuade him, but there was no stopping him: when Octavian marched his army towards Rome, a reluctant senate surrendered. On 19 Sextilis (the month which was later named August), taking a cousin as his colleague, Octavian became the consul of Rome; he was nineteen years old.

What happened next was perhaps more audacious still: feeling cold-shouldered by the senate, Octavian switched allegiance and agreed to work with his former enemy, Antony. Together with another Caesarian officer, Lepidus, they formed a 'triumvirate' – a powerful union of three men – and they set out on a programme of revenge and retaliation. First on the list of names was Cicero; Antony was adamant about that. After all, Cicero had attacked Antony bitterly in his *Philippics*; worse still, he had later published the speeches for all to read. The Greek biographer

Plutarch tells us that

*for the first two days Caesar kept up his struggle to save Cicero, but on the third day he gave up and betrayed him.*

(Life of Cicero 46.5)

Whether or not this story is true, we don't know. But, either way, it is hard to forgive Octavian for his share in Cicero's death.

On 7 December 43 B.C. Cicero was finally hunted down and killed by men acting for the triumvirs. The deed done, his killers sent Cicero's mutilated remains back to Rome, where a delighted Antony had them displayed for all to see in the middle of the forum. There, pinned to the speaker's platform, was Cicero's head – together with the hands which had written the *Philippics* (see further p. 32).

### Final verdicts

Cicero's policy in supporting the young Octavian and facilitating his rapid rise up the political ladder has been much criticized, both by those living at the time and by later historians. But, as we have seen, Cicero was not entirely naïve; nor did he ever completely trust Octavian. While he praised the young man to the skies in public, in his private correspondence he continued to express his concerns. Behind Octavian's back, Cicero could joke that the young man must be given 'praise, honours, and – the push' (*To his friends* 11.20.1). A more sombre note of detachment can be traced in a letter to Marcus Brutus, which Cicero sent in April 43 B.C. – just eight months before his own death. Reflecting on his policy towards Octavian, Cicero ominously wrote:

*I just hope that I can guide and steer him as I have done until now.*

(To Brutus 1.3.1)

Cicero's letter to Brutus reminds us of the great influence he had once exerted over his young protégé. Plutarch tells us that Octavian used to sit at Cicero's feet and even called him 'father' (*Life of Cicero* 45.2). And there is evidence to suggest that the experienced man of state made a lasting impression on the young Octavian. For, many years later, when the elderly Augustus found one of his grandchildren reading a book of Cicero's, he paid the lasting tribute to him as 'a master of words and a patriot' (*Life of Cicero* 49.5).

But there was always a far more sinister aspect to their relationship. And our sympathy for Cicero's death should not blind us to the fact that he was just as willing to kill, as to die, for his Republican ideals. In the cut and thrust game of Roman political life, Cicero and Octavian had each been using the other as a means to their own political ends. It was a gamble

for which Cicero ultimately paid. Unlike Antony, Cicero had never underestimated the courage and ability of this extraordinary youth; but what he hadn't predicted was Octavian's duplicity and incredible instinct for survival – skills that would serve him well in the stormy years to come.

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